



**DECISION MEMO**  
**PONDO FIRE SALVAGE PROJECT**  
**U.S. FOREST SERVICE**  
**FEATHER FALLS**  
**FEATHER RIVER RANGER DISTRICT**  
**BUTTE COUNTY, CALIFORNIA**

**BACKGROUND**

The Ponderosa Fire began about 1:16 p.m., Tuesday, August 29, 2017, at Ponderosa and Lumpkin roads in the Feather Falls area, 2 miles NW of Forbestown. The fire burned 4,106 acres and consumed 55 structures, through September 12, when it was 100% contained. The fire area included 1,654 acres of National Forest System (NFS) lands.

Roads within the fire perimeter provide access to NFS lands and are main motor ways connecting the communities of Feather Falls and Forbestown.

High severity fire burned along Lumpkin Road before the intersection to the highly used Feather Falls National Recreation Trail at the southern end of the Feather Falls Scenic Area. Lumpkin Road is also a thoroughfare to a segment of the Feather River Ranger District that includes Golden Trout and Little Grass Valley Reservoir Campgrounds.

The Ponderosa Fire burned in a municipal watershed that drains into the South Fork Feather River, Middle Fork Feather River, and Ponderosa Reservoir before entering Lake Oroville which provides drinking water to 25 million of the state's 39 million people.

Powerlines and phone line overlap with treatment units. PG&E has started falling trees that compromise and hinder maintenance of these lines.

NFS lands between Feather Falls and NFS road 20N24; T. 20N., R. 6E., Sections 11, 14, 15, 23, and 26 were burned severely in the Ponderosa Fire. Pockets of severe tree mortality (up to 100%) occurred within the fire area. Burn severity was mapped at 1,620 acres low, 844 acres moderate, and 1,642 acres of high severity. These dead, dying, and structurally damaged live trees present a safety hazard and risk to forest visitors, employees, infrastructure, and facilities.

The January, 2004, Sierra Nevada Forest Plan Amendment record of decision provides for ecosystem restoration following catastrophic disturbance events through the salvage harvest of dead and dying trees conducted to recover the economic value of this material and to support objectives for reducing hazardous fuels, improving forest health, reintroducing fire, and/or re-establishing forested conditions.

Providing socioeconomic benefits, including the provision of a sustainable supply of timber, is part of the mandate of the USDA Forest Service. Providing adequate timber supplies contributes to the economic stability of rural communities in Sierra Nevada forests. Receipts from this sale

would be divided between reforestation of this project area and funds to plan future salvage projects on the District.

## DECISION

I have decided to salvage timber in areas of high vegetation burn severity on approximately 250 acres of NFS lands. Salvage treatment units include slash and site preparation, reforestation, and release treatments. Slash will be spread from logging operations to reduce erosion on the high soil burn severity areas that have no topsoil. To re-establish forested conditions within areas that burned with high vegetation burn severity, reforestation will be accomplished through cultural treatments. Areas will be reforested with tree species native to the ecological habitat type. Wide spaced cluster planting will be designed to achieve a more heterogeneous distribution of trees that will better mimic the aesthetics and composition of a natural stand. The wide-spaced cluster planting strategy is also designed to reduce costs of follow-up treatments such as pre-commercial thinning. Subsequent release treatment is designed to reduce competing vegetation which would likely inhibit the survival and growth of planted trees.

All project activities will comply with the management requirements to reduce or prevent adverse effects by Ponderosa Fire Salvage Project as set out in Table 1 (attached).

Re-entry may occur up to 3 years to remove any additional danger trees for additional volume. Trees to be removed under this project will be designated using the Marking Guidelines for Fire-Injured Trees and Hazard Trees for the Pondo Fire Salvage Project (Appendix B). These guidelines are based on tree marking guidelines developed by Region 5, Forest Health Protection (Smith and Cluck 2011, Angwin et al. 2012). The boundaries of the polygons on the attached map (Figure 1) shows the location of salvage tree removal.

This action is categorically excluded from documentation in an environmental impact statement (EIS) or an environmental assessment (EA). The applicable category of actions is identified in agency procedures as 36 CFR 220.6(e)(13); *salvage of dead and/or dying trees not to exceed 250 acres, requiring no more than ½ mile of temporary road construction. The proposed action may include incidental removal of live or dead trees for landings, skid trails, and road clearing.* This category of action(s) is applicable because *harvest of fire-damaged trees* is one of the specific examples provided in the Code of Federal Regulations.

I find that there are no extraordinary circumstances that would warrant further analysis and documentation in an EA or EIS. I took into account resource conditions identified in agency procedures that should be considered in determining whether extraordinary circumstances might exist:

- Federally listed threatened or endangered species or designated critical habitat, species proposed for Federal listing or proposed critical habitat, or Forest Service sensitive species – There are no threatened or endangered or candidate species in the project area. There is no designated or proposed critical habitat for threatened or endangered species in the project area. Based on the type and degree of proposed activities within the wildlife analysis area there would not be direct or indirect effects to threatened, endangered, proposed, candidate, or Forest Service sensitive species.

- Flood plains, wetlands, or municipal watersheds – The application of best management practices (BMP) will promote proper drainage and soil stabilization to limit potential for sedimentation and compliance with the Clean Water Act.
- Congressionally designated areas such as wilderness, wilderness study areas, or national recreation areas – The project area is not located in a Congressionally-designated area.
- Inventoried roadless areas or potential wilderness areas – The project area is not located in an inventoried roadless area or potential wilderness areas.
- Research natural areas – None are present.
- American Indians and Alaska Native religious or cultural sites – No protected areas have been identified within the project area. If new cultural resources are discovered during the course of operations, the operation will stop until the new discoveries have been surveyed. It is possible further activities may be allowed under the supervision of heritage resource specialists.
- Archaeological sites, or historic properties or areas – Avoidance mitigation will ensure that heritage resources are fully protected in accordance with the 1988 Plumas National Forest Land and Resource Management Plan, as amended, and according to standard protection measures outlined in II (A) of the First Amended Programmatic Agreement among the USDA Forest Service, Pacific Southwest Region, the Advisory Council on Historic Preservation, and the California State Historic Preservation Officer, Regarding the Process for Compliance with Section 106 of the National Historic Preservation Act for Undertakings on the National Forests of the Pacific Southwest Region (Region 5 Programmatic Agreement, 2013).

## PUBLIC INVOLVEMENT

This action was originally listed as a proposal November 8, 2017, on the Plumas National Forest Schedule of Proposed Actions and updated periodically during the analysis. On November 15, 2017 the Feather River Ranger District sent letters to Estom Yumeka Tribe of Enterprise Rancheria, Tyme Maidu Tribe of Berry Creek Rancheria, Concow Maidu Tribe of Mooretown Rancheria, and to 61 individuals, organizations, institutions, industry representatives, and government agencies.

On November 30, 2017 the Forest Service received comments from the John Muir Project (JMP) and the Center for Biological Diversity (CBD) stating an EA or EIS must be prepared for the project.

*The cause of the fire could be “highly controversial” if “an arsonist, who was an employee of the local logging industry” was creating a “light it and log it” situation. CAL FIRE law enforcement officers arrested a 29-year-old suspect, Tuesday, August 29, 2017 on suspicion of causing the Ponderosa Fire. He is suspected of recklessly starting a campfire outside a designated campground and allowing it to escape. October 4, 2017, a Butte County judge found there was enough evidence to charge the same Oroville man for his alleged role in starting the devastating Ponderosa Fire. The incident is unrelated to a Quincy man to whom the letter makes reference.*

*"The project documents do not explicitly state that there will not be a larger post-fire logging project that will be proposed and implemented after this CE in the same fire area."* The Forest Service has no plans to propose or implement a larger post-fire logging project beyond this CE in the same fire area.

*Due to impacts to California spotted owl, "an EA or EIS must be prepared"* There are no California spotted owl protected activity centers (PAC), home range core areas (HRCA), or territories in the project area. The closest activity centers to any project acres are BU019 at 1.4 miles distant and BU078 at 2.4 miles distant. In the biological evaluation (USDA Forest Service 2017) California spotted owl was characterized as a species whose habitat is not in or adjacent to the wildlife analysis area and would not be affected by the project.

*"The proposal would violate the Migratory Bird Treaty Act by targeting patches of snag-forest habitat for clearcutting during nesting season".* Trees not meeting utilization standards shall be used to meet snag or large down log standards for the Sierra Nevada Forests Plan Amendment (USDA Forest Service 2004). The marking guidelines leave by selection cavity trees, oak being the species of preference. Based on the type and degree of proposed activities within the wildlife analysis area, there would not be direct or indirect effects to migratory bird species (USDA Forest Service 2017).

In accordance with Federal Regulations, the mere presence of one or more of these resource conditions does not preclude use of a categorical exclusion (CE). It is the existence of a cause-effect relationship between a proposed action and the potential effect on these resource conditions, and if such a relationship exists, the degree of the potential effect of a proposed action on these resource conditions (36 CFR 220.6 (b)(2)).

## FINDINGS REQUIRED BY OTHER LAWS AND REGULATIONS

This decision is consistent with the Plumas National Forest Land Management Plan as amended by the 2004 Sierra Nevada Forest Plan Amendment (SNFPA) supplemental EIS and ROD.

This project meets the requirements of the National Historic Preservation Act of 1966, as amended and implementing procedures outlined in the Region 5 Programmatic Agreement 2013.

The project will have no effect to any threatened, endangered or candidate species and thereby complies with the Endangered Species Act of 1973.

## ADMINISTRATIVE REVIEW (APPEAL) OPPORTUNITIES

This project is not subject to appeal (36 CFR 215) or objection (36 CFR 218).

## IMPLEMENTATION DATE

This action can be implemented immediately.





## CONTACT

For additional information concerning this decision, contact: Clay R. Davis, District Planner, Feather River Ranger District, 875 Mitchell Avenue, Oroville, CA 95965; telephone (530) 532-8940; or email [clayrdavis@fs.fed.us](mailto:clayrdavis@fs.fed.us).

*Katherine A. Carpenter*  
KATHERINE A. CARPENTER

*12/11/2017.*

Date

Acting District Ranger

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Angwin, P.A., D.R. Cluck, P.J. Zamgino, B.W. Oblinger and W.C. Woodruff. 2012. Hazard tree guidelines for Forest Service facilities and roads in the Pacific Southwest Region. USDA Forest Service, Forest Health Protection, Region 5, Susanville, CA. Report # RO-12-01. 40p.

Smith, S.L. and D.R. Cluck. 2011. Marking guidelines for fire-injured trees in California. USDA Forest Service, Forest Health Protection, Region 5, Susanville, CA. Report # RO-11-01. 13 p.

USDA Forest Service. 2004. Sierra Nevada forest plan amendment, final supplemental environmental impact statement. Pacific Southwest Region, Vallejo, CA.

USDA Forest Service. 2017. Terrestrial and aquatic wildlife biological assessment/biological evaluation management indicator species report migratory bird species report, Ponderosa Fire salvage project. Plumas National Forest. Unpublished.